

Vladimir P. Petrović

*Institute for Balkan Studies
Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts
Belgrade*

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Vojislav Filipović

*Archaeologist
Belgrade*

The Roman Station *Timacum Maius* (?) Evidence of Urbanization and Communications

Abstract: The 2009 archaeological campaign at Niševac, eastern Serbia, has provided important evidence for the urban growth of a Roman settlement, such as drains and a section of the Roman road traversing the settlement. Along with a sumptuous structure furnished with a wall heating system discovered in 2008, the latest excavation results provide clues as to the importance of the settlement which, containing all elements of Roman urban architecture, offers further corroboration to its presumed identification as the Roman station of *Timacum Maius* on the *Lissus-Naissus-Ratiaria* road.

Keywords: Svrlijig, *Timacum Maius*, archaeological excavations, urbanization, *Lissus-Naissus-Ratiaria* road

The purpose of the continued fieldwork in the Niševac village area near Svrlijig in the Svrlijski Timok river valley, eastern Serbia, was to deepen the previously collected archaeological data about a sizeable Roman settlement, presumed to have been *Timacum Maius*, a station on the *Lissus-Naissus-Ratiaria* road that connected the Adriatic and the Danube (Petrović 2007: 81–95). This road was the shortest link between the Adriatic ports and the mineral-rich areas of the central Balkans, thus the area of the city of *Naissus* from which it took a north-eastward course towards *Ratiaria*, Trajan's colony on the Danube near modern Archar in Bulgaria. In the famous Roman itinerary, *Tabula Peutingeriana*, *Timacum Maius* figures as the first station on the section of the road from *Naissus* to *Ratiaria*.

Archaeological and other data suggesting that *Timacum Maius* might have been situated in the Niševac village area has already been discussed (Petrović and Filipović 2007; 2008). The site of Kalnica sitting on a low river terrace on the left side of the Svrlijski Timok is the area where *Timacum Maius* was assumed to have been located as early as the nineteenth century (Kanitz 1986: 350; Dragašević 1887: 53). P. Petrović, concerned with the issue of identifying the location of both *Timacum* stations (*Maius* and *Minus*) for decades, suggested Niševac as the site of *Timacum Maius* in a number of his studies (Petrović 1968; 1976a; 1976b; 1992; 1995 and 1997). Further, M. Kostić's information about the remains of a Roman bathhouse excavated by the Timok river at Niševac in 1956 (Kostić 1970: 59) is corroborated by the

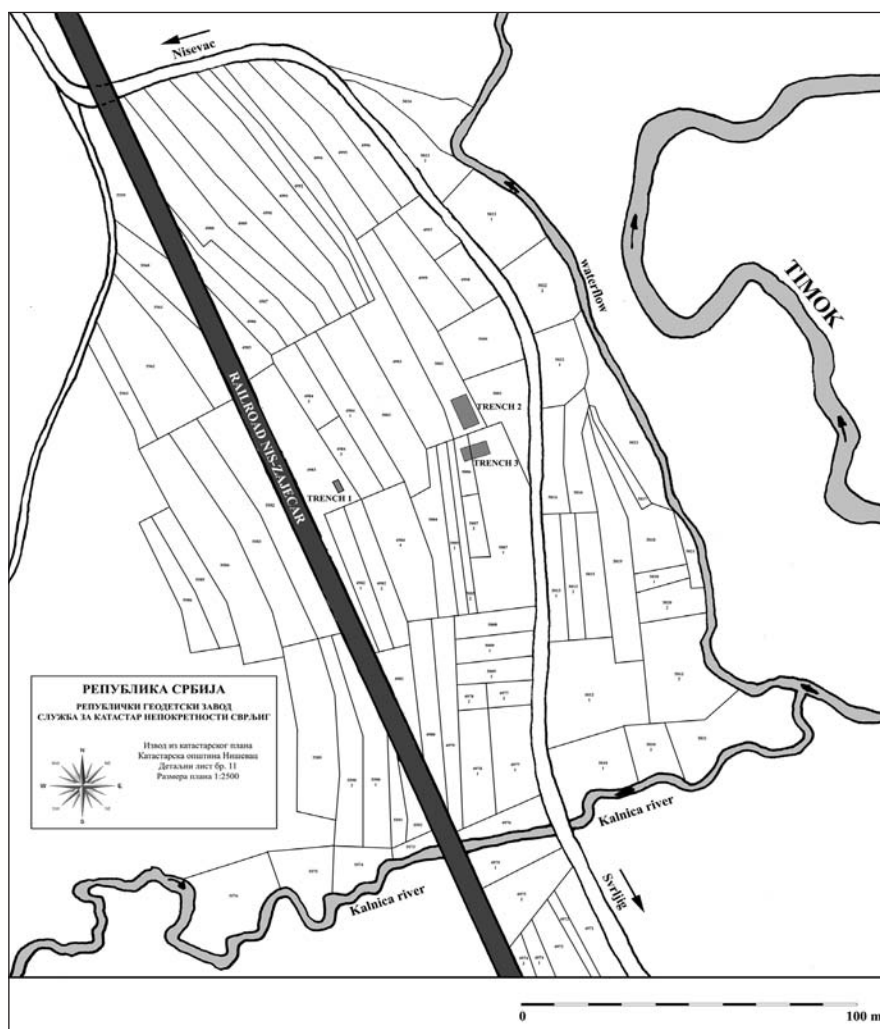
still visible building debris scattered on the lowest Timok terrace, some 150 metres north of the 2009 excavation area, in a zone threatened by modern melioration works. As already suggested (Petrović and Filipović 2007), the Roman settlement at Kalnica should be regarded as having formed a whole with the nearby fortification known as Svrliški Grad (Svrljig Fort). The latter's remains were first described in the 1860s by a local physician who defined it as the best preserved fortification in Knjaževac County (Mačaj 1866: 344). A little later, ancient Svrljig was an object of interest of M. Dj. Milićević and General J. Mišković, who left detailed descriptions of the fort (Milićević 1876: 833; Mišković 1881: 53 ff). On the other hand, the famous late nineteenth-century antiquarian and lover of Balkan antiquities Felix Kanitz made few remarks about Svrljig Fort, paying much more attention instead to the Roman site near Niševac, which he believed to have been *Timacum Maius* (Kanitz 1986: 350). After Kanitz, Svrljig Fort was not an object of interest until the 1950s, when it was surveyed by Djurdje Bošković who took a close look at it and produced an expert description of both the fort and the nearby medieval ruins (Bošković 1951: 225).

The 2009 archaeological campaign

The first trial excavation campaign, carried out in 2008, unearthed in Trench 1 the remains of an obviously luxurious structure fitted with a wall heating system (Petrović and Filipović 2009). The campaign launched in 2009 was a trial excavation some 40 metres north of Trench 1 (Plan 1).¹ Two trenches were opened: Trench 2 (10m × 5m) and Trench 3 (8m × 3m).

The entire Trench 2 yielded a large quantity of Roman potsherds, fragmented animal bone, a few important metal finds and coins dating from the second half of the third and early fourth centuries. A substantial feature built of coursed limestone suggesting a shallow water drainage channel was found in the first and second excavation layers. Its best-preserved portion ran along a southwest-northeast axis. Perpendicular to it were the insubstantial remains of a similar but smaller-sized construction. The larger central "channel" consisted of two parallel walls about 30cm thick each and reached an average depth of about 30–35cm. A few slab-like stones were

¹ The 2009 campaign, organized by the Institute for Balkan Studies, SASA, was authorized by the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Serbia (no. 633-00-313/2009-03 of 4/11/2009) and funded by the Ministry of Culture and the Municipality of Svrljig. The member of the team on behalf of the Municipality and the Cultural Centre of Svrljig was Slaviša Milivojević, Director of the Local Museum Collection at the Svrljig Cultural Centre. The excavation was conducted on lots nos. 5002 and 5007/1 owned by Kovička Pavlović and Radoslav Vučković respectively.



Site of Kalnica, village of Niševac: site plan with the position of trenches

in its part nearer to the perpendicular feature. As its top lay only 10–15 cm beneath the ploughed field surface, it understandably was in a poor state of preservation. In the lowest, third, excavation layer in the central part of Trench 2 was a larger surface of tightly and irregularly packed limestone rubble which was overlaid by the stone construction registered in the first and second layers. This stone surface had an area of $3\text{ m} \times 2.5\text{ m}$ and was covered all over with ceramic fragments and broken animal bone. Its poor state of preservation makes it difficult to say whether it is a part of a building or, which seems more likely, of the substructure of an intra-settlement street/road from which water drained off into the central channel.

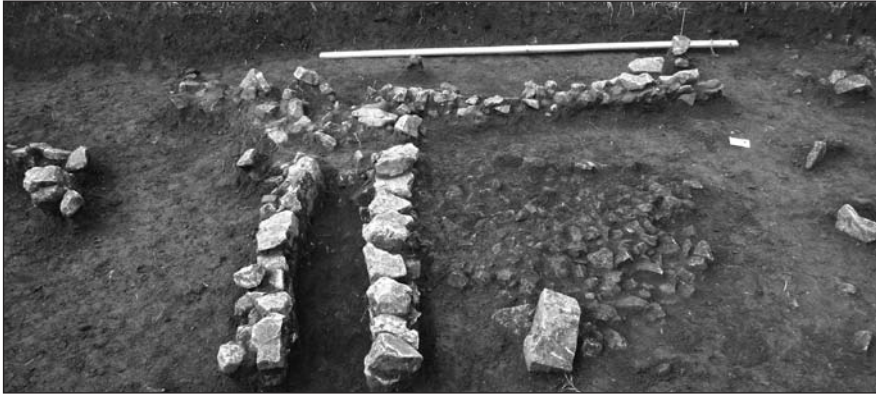


Fig. 1 Trench 2: Central drainage channel along a SW-NE axis (view from the east)

The discovered system of two perpendicular drainage channels might suggest a major, inter-urban, and a minor, intra-settlement, road that intersected at a right angle and, naturally, used to be furnished with deeper drainage channels (Chevallier 1997: 124). The larger channel into which the smaller one discharged ran towards the Timok, where excessive rainwater, and possibly liquid waste, was obviously discharged.

The third excavation layer at the south end of Trench 2 yielded a surface $3.5\text{m} \times 2\text{m}$ with larger lumps of daub, suggesting a dwelling whose size was impossible to determine because it extended further into the southeast and southwest trench profiles. Over the entire surface were found numerous fragments of larger-sized pottery vessels, apparently of an early Iron Age date. Although this surface and the larger stone surface in the central part of Trench 2 were on relatively close levels, apparently the prehistoric and Roman materials did not mix.

Trench 3 ($8\text{m} \times 3\text{m}$) was opened some ten metres southeast of Trench 2. At a depth of only 10–15 cm from the ground surface were found two parallel walls of broken stone and occasional brick bound in lime mortar. The space between the walls, set 3.5 m apart, was filled with compacted river pebbles and gravel, and the entire surface had obviously been levelled. This construction ran towards the Timok along a southwest-northeast axis, and was also registered on the surface of a crop field in the same direction some 30 m southeast of Trench 3. It should be noted that it is parallel with the central drainage channel and the possible internal road registered in Trench 2. This is probably the top course (*summum dorsum*) of a major road traversing the settlement (Chevallier 1997: 111). The road was lined with kerb stones, and was probably paved with locally extracted gravel and pebbles. The part of the Timok riverbed towards which the road leads is very shallow and can be easily crossed even today. After the discovery of the



Fig. 2 Trench 3: Possible SW-NE intra-settlement communication in *Timacum Maius* (?)

Roman road, excavation in that zone was cancelled in order to be resumed in a more broadly designed campaign which would establish its exact position in relation to the settlement and its possible importance in the process of urbanization.

The evidence of urbanization, roads and movable archaeological material (plentiful potsherds, metal and coin finds) provides clues as to the size, importance and chronology of the Roman settlement presumed to have been *Timacum Maius*. The intra-settlement communications with an orthogonal drainage system suggest careful urban planning. Residential and other buildings grew within sizeable rectangular blocks formed by the street grid. The abundant presence of potsherds, including luxury pieces of fine fabric and decorated with mythological imagery, provides some clues to understanding the character and strength of the population of the Roman settlement and testifies to their contacts with remote parts of the Empire. Despite the devastation due to the shallowness of the cultural layer, the site has yielded plentiful and convincing evidence of the settlement's architecture, road network and chronologically long and developed life. It has a high archaeological potential and further excavation will hopefully establish the boundaries and zones of the settlement and give answers to some as yet unsatisfactorily elucidated questions.

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